

Homily
4th Sunday of Advent - A

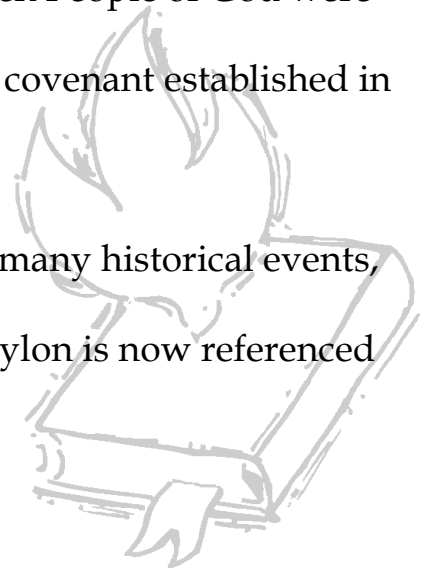
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
December 21-22, 2019

Is 35: 1-6, 10
Ps 146: 6-7, 8-9, 9-10
Jas 5: 7-10
Mt 11: 2-11

With this homily, I am entering what I call “Fr. Ray Lescher territory,” venturing into social justice topics that may not seem right just before we enter the Christmas Season. That said, I feel compelled to address the topics of sacrifice and suffering, since these themes lead very well into the nativity scene and what we are about to celebrate.

Each year around this time, I receive a letter from the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, whose ministry ventures into the city of Baghdad, Iraq. For those invested in Old Testament history, the Tower of Babel story from the eleventh chapter of Genesis references the city of Babylon, the location where the supposed Chosen People of God were exiled due to their disobedience to God and the covenant established in the early books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The city of Babylon has been a focal point of many historical events, including today. As many know, the city of Babylon is now referenced



as Baghdad, Iraq, the cite of many acts of violence and sufferings, both to those of the Christian faith as well as others who do not adhere to the religion of the state.

In previous letters I have received from the good Carmelite sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, I learned that many of the Christians living in that region do not want to leave their home, even as their homes, schools and churches have been destroyed by some members of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. As a result, a good number of families have abandoned their homes and have sought refuge in convents and other places of worship, often fighting for their right to exist in an area often hostile to their way of existing.

This year's letter was no different than the past. Writing on behalf of the sisters is Sr. Marcelline Koch, OP who serves as the North American Dominican Promoter of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. In her correspondences to Sr. Luma (a General Councilor of the order), Sr. Marcelline writes that those Christians remaining in Iraq have protested the manner in which they have been treated. The violent response of the

state has resulted in the loss of over four hundred lives since October.

Here is what Sr. Luma wrote about the sufferings endured by the good

Christians of Iraq (I edited the following for clarity)...

Dear Marcelline

The situation in Baghdad is not good. Today we enter the 54th day of demonstrations. The intend was to have a very peaceful demonstration but sadly many of these demonstrators have been killed. The government is not doing anything or changing their polices. Young men and women are determined that they will not end the demonstration until they get what they want - they want "their country" back. Our school in Baghdad closed for a month and now it reopened; still, students are not attending, as they prefer to go to demonstrations.

What you read about Cardinal Sako plan is true; the Church's Christmas celebrations will be very limited in all the country this year in solidarity with our young people in the middle and southern part of the country and in solidarity with families who lost their beloved ones in the past months.

Please keep this country in your prayers. If you can share the news you see on the web about Iraq with other people will be very helpful. The world is not reacting to what our young people are doing. They left their homes and have been demonstrating because they want a free Iraq - they want a country.

Blessed advent to you

Luma, OP

In my reflections this week, I could not help but think about the plight of those Christians who live in the Holy Land as well. As I learned from my visit there some two years ago, less than one percent of those who live in Israel profess the Christian faith, the rest leaving the country out of fear of their lives. I cannot help but think about those Christians who suffer from the hands of the Boko Haram in Africa, the oppression of the Chinese underground Christians by the national government nor the general terror that is associated with the leaders in North Korea. Even within our own local communities, many in the faith live in conditions that are not acceptable and certainly the efforts of our local, state and national leaders are not sufficient in caring for many of those who live in our area east of Kankakee.

As I reflected on Sr. Luma's words as well as those from on today's readings, I came across an article written by Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, a well-respected and revered man in Central America who was brutally murdered in the early 1980s because of his faith. In his reflection, Archbishop Romero refers to the nativity at Christmas,

something that all of us cherish as part of our Advent and Christmas tradition. However, Archbishop Romero does not speak about the nativity with affection. Rather, he tells us that until every poor person in the world is fed, until all the homeless find somewhere to live, that we should take the statues of the nativity and burn them. He challenges us to live the message of the gospel at the same time we are admiring it.

I was struggling in my prayer as to why Archbishop Romero would use such harsh words during such an intimate, loving season like Christmas; I certainly think that our current Holy Father would share an analogous view of the poor with Archbishop Romero but certainly would choose different verbiage. That said, Archbishop Romeo's sentiment about the poor is right on target – if we do not understand the message of the nativity, it is nothing but a nice-looking thing to stick under our tree. And yet, I would like to think that in this parish, we have a respect for what the nativity means and that we do not take it for granted.

The scripture readings for this weekend's Masses show us two examples of how God's call was given to people of the world. Joseph eventually accepted the call and made a commitment to take care of his family. But King Ahaz of the first reading rejected the call and, in the process, rejected the true king that was about to enter his life.

In my reflections prior to Christmas, I offer you my three responses to these reflections that I ask you humbly to consider prior to us beginning our Christmas celebrations. First, I ask you to consider what kind of Christian you have been this Advent season. I certainly struggle with this issue – if I cannot put my own life on the line for the sake of the other, if I cannot make the right sacrifice for loving and protecting you in God's name, then I have no business standing in this sanctuary to preach the gospel message. To be a Christian is to be like Christ – to honor the coming of Christ is to honor what Christ did by modeling the life he lived. I am obligated to do this if I have any chance to see heaven, as do all of you in this room and certainly outside of this room.

Second, I ask you to consider when the last time was since you spent a moment with each member of your immediate family and told them how much you love them and how much you care for them, in thought, word and deed. Often the people living under the roofs of our homes are often the ones who are most neglected and taken for granted. Our love of neighbor always must start with those in our families, as the Christian home is the microcosm for the larger Church in which we pray as spiritual brothers and sisters.

Finally, I ask you to consider what you have done for the least in the kingdom of God. Christ became incarnate and took on that human nature and will so that he could be in solidarity with us, especially those most in need of God's mercy, the poor of resource and the poor of spirit. What have we done to be like Christ? In a small way, we have done our part through the "Angel Tree" project offered at St. Anne's and the Toy and Coat Drive we offered at all parishes on behalf of the poor of Sacred Heart. Just this weekend, the folks of Yorkville, IL donated the motherload of turkeys and hams for the poor of the area. Over a dozen

folks helped us clean out the convent and garage in two twenty-yard dumpsters, in preparation to renovate the property for the diocesan mission folks coming the area in November of 2020.

The whole reason that we prepare for Christmas is to learn the lesson of poverty and humility that Christ tried to teach us in life. Christ did not show us how to be Christian by living a rich life or by putting himself in front of others. Rather, Christ served others and calls us to do the same. Every time we take care of those less fortunate than us, we are serving Christ. And whenever we serve Christ, we see the face of God in our lives. This is the true gift of Christmas, something that we can never take for granted or neglect.

If we wish to call ourselves Christian, then we must first make an effort to love our king by loving those he created. We must love others to understand Christ's love. If we do that, then the nativity under our tree makes sense, a nativity full of humility and great care. If we do not, then the nativity is just another ornament that has no real meaning in our lives.

At the Christmas Masses, I will invite kids from the parishes to process with the statues of the Nativity that we will view during the Christmas Season. I also will bless any Christ-child statues that you wish to bring with you at any of the Masses that I celebrate. I invite you all to attend these Masses and celebrate the gift of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in our lives. May we all hear God's call to us, bring it around the altar, share it with each other, and offer it to the people that we meet. This is our prayer.